



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO H.E. Mr MARIO ANTONIO VELÁSQUEZ FERNÁNDEZ
AMBASSADOR OF PANAMA TO THE HOLY SEE***

Saturday, 28 February 1998

Mr Ambassador, I am very pleased to receive you at this solemn presentation of the Letters of Credence which accredit you as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Panama to the Holy See. It also gives me the opportunity to greet you and to offer you my most cordial welcome. I am deeply grateful for the respectful message you have brought from President Ernesto Pérez Balladares. I would like to reciprocate by expressing my best wishes for the prosperity and peace of the dear Panamanian people. I therefore ask you, Mr Ambassador, kindly to convey them to the highest authority of your nation.

2. Since the time when Núñez de Balboa crossed your land and made the Pacific Ocean known to European culture, Panama, especially since the canal which bears her name was built to connect these seas, has become famous as the crossroads between the American lands and the great seas that surround them. Since your country will soon take over the management of this masterpiece of human ingenuity, preparations are also being made for a decisive step in the vocation which destiny seems to have assigned her: to be a communications bridge and meeting place. Thus the beginning of the third millennium acquires a very special meaning for Panamanians, and offers a wellfounded hope of a substantial improvement in their living conditions, a growing affirmation of their own identity and a more prominent role in history. Moreover, the coincidence of this event with the celebration of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 offers the Panamanian people a providential opportunity to live with special intensity this "year of the Lord's favour" which the Church proclaims for all Christians. In fact, the Jubilee's biblical tradition is rooted in God's supreme lordship over the earth and in his desire to exercise it for the benefit of humanity, especially for the most underprivileged, by revealing new opportunities particularly for them (cf. Lv 25:23; *Tertio millennio adveniente*, nn. 12-14). This profound experience of faith in the Lord's saving and provident intervention gives rise to a feeling of gratitude in man, and of respect and responsibility for the goods of creation.

3. This promising outlook for the future is also a call to all Panamanians, especially to their representatives and those who have direct responsibility for the administration of the common good, to give priority to the service of integral progress for all citizens. Indeed, a mere increase of material goods is not the most important thing in the life of individuals, businesses and nations. On the contrary, "development ... turns against those whom it is meant to benefit" (*Sollicitudo rei socialis*, n. 28), when it is limited to the economic aspect. "It is therefore necessary to create life-styles in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of common growth are the factors which determine consumer

choices, savings and investments" (*Centesimus annus*, n. 36). It is desirable then that the most be made of new opportunities for increased solidarity, especially towards less fortunate individuals and groups and, with greater hope of success, to enlarge projects that the Government has already undertaken to develop the most depressed areas of the country or to repair the damage caused by natural disasters, while always respecting the lead role to be played by each sector, which needs to rely on everyone's participation in formulating and implementing these projects. In fact, humanity's recent history shows how fragile and fleeting is a development which, for the sake of the maximum productivity of material goods, sacrifices the primordial role of the person in all human activity or excessively and destructively exploits a land which the Creator has entrusted to man as a responsible and respectful steward (cf. Gn 1:28).⁴ I am pleased to see that your country's relations with the Holy See are marked by mutual respect and a spirit of collaboration. They reflect the close relationship between the Church and the Panamanian people, whom she has served and guided since the Cross of Christ was planted in these lands, proclaiming and revealing to her children "man's lofty calling and the divine seed within him" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 3). Conscious of the Gospel-inspired values that ennoble individuals and nations, Catholics consider it their inescapable duty to co-operate in the common good, putting at the nation's service, in addition to each person's technical and intellectual abilities, a special sensitivity to the ethical and spiritual aspects that dignify and enrich the human being and sustain his life in society. By proclaiming the greatness of the dignity of the person, created and loved by God as his image, redeemed by Christ and called to share with him in the glory of total victory over evil and death, the Church, with full respect for the duties incumbent on the public authorities, contributes to the common good of the citizens and defends their inalienable rights such as respect for life in all its stages, support for the family, care of the weakest and access for everyone to a complete education, which includes the spiritual and religious dimension of the human being. Moreover, these relations highlight the common esteem for human and spiritual values which the Holy See constantly proclaims in international forums. These values must be vigorously affirmed at this particular moment when communication and economic, political and cultural interdependence among nations require a common front in facing the great decisions that will determine the future of humanity. Indeed, it is of the utmost importance that the full range of human rights be promoted despite the snares set by certain immediate interests, as I recalled in my last Message for the World Day of Peace (cf. n. 2), that trust in dialogue as the best way to solve conflicts be maintained and, finally, that a genuine civilization of life and love be fostered.⁵ At the end of this meeting, Mr Ambassador, I wish to say that, despite the many years that have passed since my Pastoral Visit in 1983, I have a very vivid memory of Panama, its ecclesial communities, its families and its people. As I did then, I wish them prosperity and peace, asking for everyone the great gift of hope, which "offers solid and profound reasons for a daily commitment to transform reality in order to make it correspond to God's plan" (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 46). With these sentiments, I extend my cordial welcome to you again and to your distinguished family, as I offer you my best wishes that your stay in Rome will be very pleasant and that your mission will bear the fruit we desire for the beloved Panamanian nation.

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